

The *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series provides district leaders with a blueprint for making deep and lasting change – the kind that is likely to lead to improvements in our most struggling schools. Presented in five parts, the *Starting Fresh* series honestly addresses the challenges of restructuring low-performing schools. Through these books, districts learn both *why* and *how* to use the start fresh strategy successfully.

- 1 A New Option for School District Leaders under NCLB
- 2 Engaging Parents and the Community
- 3 Selecting the Right Providers
- 4 Establishing the Right Relationship Terms
- 5 Empowering Teachers



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## Engaging Parents and the Community in Starting Fresh



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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is a professional resource for authorizers and other education officials interested in using choice, autonomy and accountability to improve student performance.

**NACSA's mission is to achieve the establishment and operation of quality charter schools through responsible oversight in the public interest.** We believe that quality authorizing plays a critical role in creating and sustaining quality charter schools. A quality charter school is characterized by high student achievement, financial stewardship, and responsible governance and management. Charter schools can improve public education by creating greater educational opportunities for students and educators and greater educational accountability for public schools.

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## Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools

Districts and states across the country have a growing sense of urgency about turning around chronically low-performing schools. Spurred by state accountability systems and the federal No Child Left Behind mandate to “restructure” such schools, education leaders are seeking out new ways to create success for children attending schools where too many have failed for far too long.

**When they use starting fresh** district leaders allow a “new school” to start within the walls of a pre-existing school building.

One new approach that districts and states are beginning to employ is “starting fresh.” When they use starting fresh (See *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: a New Option for District Leaders under NCLB*), district leaders allow a “new school” to start within the walls of a pre-existing school building. They empower an education provider (See: *Who are Start Fresh “Providers?”*) to start and run a school under a clearly defined, performance-based contract. In contrast to more conventional “change” strategies, starting fresh gives the provider a great deal more control over school operations – such as staffing, management policies, instruction, curriculum, schedules, discipline and parent relations. This control allows the start fresh school to target every policy and practice to the learning needs of that school’s students, even when their needs differ profoundly from other students in local district schools. Extensive research from a variety of organizational fields suggests that this kind of fresh start is often the best way to achieve the dramatic change the most challenged schools need.



**starting  
fresh**

in low-performing schools

## How Can “Restructuring” Under No Child Left Behind Enable a School to “Start Fresh?”

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, when schools fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for five consecutive years, districts must act to “restructure” the school. Within that broad mandate, though, NCLB offers districts flexibility on how to restructure schools:

- Reopen the school as a charter school;
- Contract with an external provider to manage a school;
- Replace staff and leadership;
- Turn the school’s operation over to the state; or
- Engage in some other kind of restructuring.

While federal law has provided minimal guidance on exactly what it means to “restructure” a school, the term itself implies a dramatic change in business as usual. One way to effect this kind of change is starting fresh: allowing a new school to open open within the walls of the old. But whether restructuring really amounts to starting fresh depends upon how the district and school go about the change process.

The first and second option, chartering and contracting, provide the clearest avenues for allowing schools to start fresh. Chartering or contracting, however, that leads only to incremental changes or change in only one aspect of a school’s operations (e.g., a new curriculum only or a new leader only, or worse yet – just “charter” inserted into the name of the school) or that ties a new school to district-wide policies would not be considered starting fresh as defined here. Instead, district leaders empower, by way of a charter or contract, the school to truly “start fresh” with a clean slate on which to re-create all aspects of the school’s design and structure.



## Who are Start Fresh “Providers”?

Many different kinds of teams can serve as school operators, or “providers” as we call them here, under the start fresh strategy. Some operate as nonprofit entities while others are for-profit companies. Examples include:

- Self-formed teams of teachers in a local community
- Teams of parents, teachers and district administrators
- School management organizations, either new or experienced, local or national, that start and manage multiple schools
- Organizations providing education-related services (e.g., community-based organizations working in education or child development)
- Operators of stand-alone charter schools ready to replicate

The growing interest in the start fresh strategy has brought about a heightened sense of the challenges to starting fresh successfully. In response, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has developed a series of publications to help district leaders implement a successful start fresh strategy.

This installment in the *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series tackles one of the most important challenges of starting fresh in a chronically low-performing school: engaging parents and the community in ways that propel the effort forward and contribute to its success.



## How Does Starting Fresh Differ From Conventional School Improvement Strategies?

“Change” is not a new term to public education. In fact, schools have been trying for years, even decades, to make changes that will improve student performance. However, to date these changes have been conventional, typically involving small to moderate changes, often one at a time. Curriculum and instructional changes, professional development and staffing changes are common elements of a conventional change strategy.

**Starting fresh** involves bold change in all aspects of school operations and leadership. Starting fresh occurs when a district enters into a contract or charter with a provider that has authority over all critical aspects of a school’s policies and practices. Two aspects of change distinguish starting fresh most clearly from conventional change strategies:

- **Across-the-board change.** Not only is the leader different; all or most of the staff are as well. The school is truly in a position to create a new culture and a new set of approaches to teaching and learning, and to ensure that every aspect of the school is coordinated and complements the overall focus and culture.
- **Authority to do things differently.** When a district starts fresh, it gives the provider a great deal more control over school operations – such as staffing, management policies, instruction, schedules, discipline and parent relations. This control allows the start fresh school to target every policy and practice to the learning needs of that individual school’s students, even when their needs differ profoundly from other students in local district schools.

Extensive research from a variety of organizational fields suggests that this kind of fresh start is often the best way to achieve the dramatic change underperforming schools need.



## The Engagement Challenge

When starting fresh, district leaders must be prepared to engage parents and the wider community linked to the school(s) in question. Starting fresh presents a huge opportunity to listen *and* respond to the community a school serves. Done well, engaging the community and parents can help garner broad support for the effort. Done poorly, it can limit your success by, for instance, slowing the process or limiting the students whose parents opt to attend the start fresh school.

Community engagement needs to start long before a decision is made to start fresh in a school. In most instances when a school is struggling, parents and community members know it. They want a better education for their children. Engaging them even in the decision to start fresh can get a change effort off to a firm start.

**Community organizations** have played a vital role in bringing attention to ongoing problems in poor and low-income neighborhoods throughout the U.S.

Even with these proactive steps, though, you might be shocked and surprised by the inevitable twin emotions that come roaring forth upon announcing that change is coming: anger that change has taken so long and anger that change must happen at all. This “roar” may come only from a small minority of parents and community members. That minority, however, is likely to be vocal, and vocal minorities can have a large influence on a start fresh process.





Here are some of the predictable circumstances a start fresh process might encounter:

- Parents – even ones whose children are underserved in the existing school(s) – and community leaders will lobby to keep existing school leadership
- Advocates will accuse the district of “abandoning” the school
- Community organizations will want to lead new schools, whether or not they have the skills and competencies to do so
- Community organizations will derail efforts unless they have an active role in choosing new school providers
- Parents will be angry that something wasn’t done sooner
- Parents will be angry that the change process will take too long to affect their children
- After a change, some parents will publicly call for return of they old way of doing things
- Parents will speak strongly against the “unreasonable” demands of new school leaders and staff

These forecasts are not meant to frighten, but to forewarn. This resistance is not unique to schools – even the most successful start fresh strategies have encountered some or all of these forms of resistance. It is experienced by all organizations, public and private, that attempt major changes, even when change is essential and even when it is ultimately successful.<sup>1</sup> As one former schools superintendent remarked, “Ultimately, the recognition, anticipation and response to the emotional impacts of the change process are the most challenging aspects of a ‘fresh start’ approach.”

Here is what’s unique about change resistance in schools: in most organizations, people in the position of parents are strictly “customers,” purely recipients of a service. And then they typically care only about the resultant service/product – is it better, cheaper, more cost-effective – not about how the organization delivering it is structured or run. In schools, however, parents are a critical part of the process that determines the quality of outcome – student achievement. Successful start fresh schools often ask parents to change *their* ways even as the school is changing its approach. Such change may not always sit well with all parents. Thus, the engagement of parents is all the more critical to get right for the success of the start fresh effort.

Community organizations can play the same “help or hamper” role as parent groups in start fresh efforts. Community organizations have played a vital role in bringing attention to ongoing problems in poor and low-income neighborhoods throughout the U.S. They give voice to people who

**Ultimately, the recognition, anticipation and response to the emotional impacts of the change process are the most challenging aspects of a ‘fresh start’ approach.**

do not hold power or have connections. When it comes to starting fresh, these groups have often lobbied local leaders for years to “do something” about underperforming schools. Often these organizations help get the problem noticed and focus attention towards action – a critical first step in change.

But, there are at least two hurdles that can prevent these initiators of change from being good stewards to see it through to the end. First, in community organizing, relationships equal power. Power is essential for effecting change. But sometimes community organizations can become as concerned about protecting existing relationships with school leaders and staff as with making changes that will lead to improved student learning. Alternately, a community organization may lobby hard for a local provider



over one based elsewhere simply as a well-intended way to keep tabs on the change process and keep a hand in the future success of a school. Experience tells community leaders that this is essential. Sometimes, the community organization will be right – the local provider is the best choice. But other times, a non-local provider will be the best option. Community organization involvement that comes at the expense of choosing school providers best fit for the job is a problem.

Second, community organization leaders may not be up-to-date on education reforms that work, including the elements of a successful start fresh strategy. They may still hope that “insiders” can effect major changes. They may make excuses for students because of poverty, low parent education levels, language and cultural barriers, and the like. They may not be aware of the growing number of exemplary schools that, across the country, are achieving success where others have failed. They may unintentionally contribute to “dooming students with kindness,” rather than having “no-excuses” when it comes to student learning. Their values are on-target; but they just do not realize yet what is possible. District leaders simply can’t let good intentions get in the way of a start fresh strategy, even when they fully respect the values and leaders of community organizations.



## Approaches to Parent and Community Engagement

As more districts and states have moved forward with starting fresh, we have more and more experience on which to draw in designing effective parent and community engagement approaches. Based on the growing knowledge base, here are some steps that can help effectively engage parents and the broader community in the start fresh strategy:

1. **Publicly shift the burden of proof to those who would oppose change.** Use any available outlet, including public meetings, to share current student achievement results in the school(s) in question and anecdotes about schools serving similar populations where performance is at the high levels at which you want your students achieving. Begin public meetings with short presentations about why change is needed, what should be expected from schools, and a few comparable anecdotes of successful schools that are achieving that vision. Give people a painful view of the present and a promising, reality-based vision of the future. Many people simply do not know what successful schools have achieved with previously low-performing students. The goal is both to educate and to shift the burden to naysayers to show how their view is better for children than the vision you have presented. While public meetings are essential, it is also vital to work effectively with the media using the same methods.
2. **Listen publicly.** Engage the community in discussion. Ask students, parents and community members what they want their school to provide and achieve. What benefits do they see to continuing with the status quo versus starting fresh to achieve that vision? Treat this as a brainstorming session: a time to listen, not a time to deflect, criticize or make decisions.





**3. Listen privately.** Acknowledge longstanding and/or powerful community organizations and parent groups by scheduling private meetings with them. Follow the same prescription as in public meetings: present concise facts about the present situation and a clear vision of the future, including fact-rich anecdotes from other schools that have been successful with similar students. Keep your speaking short and really listen to what others have to say without debate or decision-making.

### Using “School Restructuring Workgroups” in San Diego

In October 2004, San Diego School Board issued a “Request For Proposals” (RFP) to reconstitute seven traditional district schools and one charter school, all determined to be in Year 4 of Program Improvement under No Child Left Behind.

To involve parents and teachers in the process, School Restructuring Workgroups were formed at each school. The goal of each Workgroup was to “gather information on restructuring options under NCLB” and make recommendations to a special committee established by the Superintendent to review restructuring proposals. Members of the Workgroups included parents, staff in the schools and community members.

During fall 2004, the Workgroups engaged in an intense process of soliciting parent and staff input through such means as holding school wide meetings, hearing presentations from district staff on restructuring options, identifying issues related to chartering and examining data about the schools’ needs.

Workgroups had the opportunity to review proposals and make recommendations about what would work best for each school. This opportunity gave new hope to parents who have felt disenfranchised by the school system. Over the years, many have given up on their local schools and the chance to offer meaningful solution to the problems reinvigorated them.



In response to the RFP, Workgroup proposals to establish independent nonprofit charters came forward in January 2005 from three district-managed schools and one charter school. In addition, the charter school in Year 4 of Program Improvement agreed, per district policy, that their existing charter would not be renewed in 2004-2005 and submitted a new charter proposal as a nonprofit independent charter with substantive changes to their staffing and curricular program. In each case, parent signatures representing 50% to 80% of the school’s new projected enrollments were submitted – with Workgroup members and community volunteers going door-to-door during Winter Break in the midst of the second highest rainfall period in San Diego’s history.

With the support of Workgroup and community members, 60% to 70% of the teachers in the schools in question signed on to the Workgroup proposals – even with the understanding that they would have to reapply for their jobs if they stayed with the “start fresh” schools. In March 2005, with over 500 Workgroup members, parents, and University and community representatives from the four schools in attendance and strongly demonstrating their commitment, the School Board approved charters for the four schools.

**4. Think about what you have heard and incorporate good ideas.** Sometimes a parent or community organization will absolutely hit the nail on the head with a point, and you must have your ears open to hear it. For example, expect parents to have concerns when current students will not benefit from a start fresh school process. Parents of current students often are concerned that their children will not be eligible for a new school because of the timing of its opening or because of attendance boundaries (see page 12). Instead of ignoring this valid concern, districts can consider alternatives to meet current student needs as well as possible.

## Getting Timing and Attendance Boundaries Right

As these two examples show, some parent concerns arise directly out of the mechanics of starting fresh in a particular situation. One shows the importance of timing, the other of thinking through attendance boundaries.

**Timing.** At Cole Middle School in Denver, Colorado, historically fewer than 15% of students were achieving grade level. So in late 2004, the Colorado State Board of Education selected KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) to take over the school. KIPP's model typically requires a planning year before the school opens for important tasks like recruiting and training the new school's leader. Then, KIPP schools begin only with a 5th grade, growing grade by grade as those students progress. In Denver, KIPP had to revise its "start fresh" plan in order to satisfy parents' concern that the restructured school would not benefit their children. In 2005, after a condensed recruitment and training period, KIPP reopened Cole as Cole College Prep, a "transition school" serving only seventh and eighth grade students. Former Cole students had the option of attending Cole College Prep or another redesigned middle school in the Cole neighborhood, and many returned. Approximately half of the students at Cole College Prep are former Cole students; the rest enrolled from neighborhoods across the district. KIPP plans to fully implement its model starting with a new 5th grade class in summer of 2007.

**Attendance boundaries.** Facing declining student achievement, the school board in Sacramento, California elected to shut down Sacramento High School in 2002 and reopen it as six autonomous charter academies in the same facility. More than eighty percent of the original student body returned, but those students who did not were assigned to different high schools in surrounding neighborhoods. Several families were dissatisfied with their loss of a neighborhood school, and demanded a new district school to serve their children. These parents and concerned teachers were granted permission to pursue the creation of a new high school to serve the old Sac High attendance zone.



**5. Cultivate leadership among supporters of successful change.** In any locale, you will find parents and community leaders who support change. These people may or may not be among the most vocal and powerful, however. They may be members of the silent majority. Or they may be current community and parent leaders who are now ready to see real change that leads to increased student performance.

Find and bring into the process people who want real change, even when change must come at the expense of current school and community leaders. Set up regular times to get their input, and enlist their help in communicating back to other parents and community members about the change process.

**Communicating facts** from other schools that have achieved academic success with similar students makes it harder for opponents to speak publicly against change and the start fresh strategy.







## Conclusion

### Chicago's Transition Advisory Councils

Under its Renaissance 2010 initiative, Chicago Public Schools is aiming to open 100 new schools by 2010, in many cases starting fresh in low performing schools. For each identified school, the district is operating an extensive parent and community outreach process to gather input about the school's "rebirth."

A key element of this process is the formation of Transition Advisory Councils (TACs) to incorporate community members in the selection and rebuilding of new schools. A group of 12-15 parents, local business leaders, educators, alumni, aldermen, community and faith-based organization representatives, and area residents assists in the selection of school models to ensure that the new educational options are of the highest quality and reflect the needs and interests of that community.

The TAC collaborates with the CPS Renaissance team in the following areas:

- Conducting community outreach activities and collecting stakeholder input;
- Networking and hosting forums with various groups and organizations;
- Providing feedback on the Request for Proposals the district issues;
- Reviewing and assessing proposals for new schools;
- Interviewing applicants and hosting community forums for the community to meet applicants; and
- Making recommendations to CPS about the educational options that should be opened at the site.

**6. Disempower naysayers.** In the same way that you empower those who support successful change, disempower those who fight change for underserved children. Communicating facts from other schools that have achieved academic success with similar students makes it harder for opponents to speak publicly against change and the start fresh strategy. Use your supporters to convince opponents with facts, success stories and knowledge about how to choose *successful* start fresh providers. Do not allow naysayers to veto, edit or control communication of information about the change process. Create a sense of urgency related to making needed changes.

None of these approaches will completely defuse the political storm that is likely to swirl around any effort to start fresh in chronically low-performing schools. They can, however, help transform parent and community interest in change from a potential roadblock to an asset. Ultimately, the people with the greatest interest in the success of the starting fresh are the parents of children who attend (or will attend) the school, and other members of the surrounding community.

### About the Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools Series

Research across a wide range of organizations tells us that starting fresh has a great deal of *potential* as a strategy for achieving substantial improvement in schools that need it the most. To realize that potential, though, district leaders need to craft a well-designed approach to starting fresh that takes advantage of what we know about successful fresh starts in schools and in other kinds of organizations.

NACSA's *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series provides practical guidance to district leaders for implementing a successful school restructuring. The first publication in the series, *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools: A New Option for District Leaders Under NCLB*, introduces what it means to start fresh and provides an overview of the benefits, challenges and key steps in a start fresh strategy for districts.

This resource in the the *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series, *Engaging Parents and the Community* discusses the importance of engaging parents and the community in the start fresh process. Other important aspects of a start fresh strategy include:

**Select the right providers** to operate start-fresh schools. Ultimately, starting fresh will only be as successful as the schools that are launched



under its banner. The schools, in turn, will succeed or fail in large part based on who steps in to operate them, whether that provider is an established organization that manages schools or a group of committed educators or community leaders. Understanding what kinds of capacity are required for successful fresh starts – and selecting providers based on that understanding – is therefore central to a district's success with starting fresh.

**Establish the right relationship terms** between the district and the providers. As noted above, the very idea of starting fresh depends on the provider having wide authority to operate the school in ways that will work for students – even if those approaches deviate from established district policies. Granting providers that latitude – and then holding them accountable for results – is another essential element of an effective start fresh approach.

**Empower teachers** to overcome resistance to the strategy. Starting fresh is controversial and much of the controversy has little to do with the children who are not learning and more to do with the adults who stand to lose jobs. Bringing teachers to the table to work in support of the start fresh goals can go a long way in implementing a successful start fresh strategy.

Each of these topics will be examined in detail in similar publications. Email [startfresh@charterauthorizers.org](mailto:startfresh@charterauthorizers.org) to request copies of *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* publications.

The *Starting Fresh in Low-Performing Schools* series is edited by Rebecca Cass, director, national activities ([rebeccac@charterauthorizers.org](mailto:rebeccac@charterauthorizers.org)) in conjunction with Greg Richmond, president ([gregr@charterauthorizers.org](mailto:gregr@charterauthorizers.org)) and John Ayers, vice president for communications ([johna@charterauthorizers.org](mailto:johna@charterauthorizers.org); 312.376.2321). Your comments, questions and suggestions about this resource or the series are welcome.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kotter, J.P. (1995, March-April), Leading Change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 19-27. See also Kim, W.C. & Mauborgne, R. (2003, April). Tipping point leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 60-69.



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